

winter of 1349 the plague at last was stayed, and men set about to repair the damage, they found the conditions of society materially altered by the reduced numbers of the population. In nearly every manor throughout the country—for the most marked characteristic of the plague had been its ubiquity—the ranks of hired labour and of the villeins owing personal service had been alike mowed down. The landlord and his bailiff were reduced to offering double and sometimes treble wages to procure hands for the demesne-farm, which would otherwise have fallen completely to waste. For the peasant was fully alive to his advantage ; he had not even waited till the national calamity was over, before pushing his claim; in the autumn of 1349, while the destruction still walked by noonday, wages had risen in full proportion to the increased market value of a day's work.<sup>1</sup> The King had issued an ordinance to meet the emergency, ordering the price of labour to remain as before. Canute's proverbial ordinance was scarcely more futile. Next year Parliament was able to meet, and at once proceeded to convert the Eoyal command into a permanent statute—the famous Statute of Labourers. It was, undoubtedly, a \* class ' measure, passed by the representatives of the lords of the manors, who led both Houses of Legislature, passed also by the merchants who employed labour in the towns, and whose attitude was all-important in the Lower House on industrial questions that concerned them. But it was scarcely so iniquitous as (for example) the Corn Law of 1815, for while it attempted to keep down the price of wages to the traditional standard, it attempted at the same time to check the rise in the price of provisions. It was an attempt to restrain change, to stop the break-up of the old system, to prevent the peasant from receiving more for his labour than of old, or paying more for his food. It was a grand experiment, whose full trial and complete failure were perhaps a necessary step in teaching mankind the laws of political economy. It was fully tried, for the statute remained unaltered, except in detail, down to the Eising of 1381, and even beyond it; punishment was to be inflicted on the labourer who received, fine on the employer who gave more

<sup>1</sup> *Bogers*, i. 306, 312 ; *Knighton*, ii. 62.